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Back Talk — Quo Vadis?

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When I was first asked by **Katina** to write this column several years ago, she suggested that by "Back Talk" she meant that I should at times take a whack at whatever in our profession and practice that I thought needed it. In general I have been very well-behaved and only occasionally snuck a caustic comment in here or there.

I decided that I should turn over a new leaf and get mean. I have always wanted to write about our own organization: The **American Library Association**. But I was always afraid for fear that I would never be able to find work again. Now, however, I am in Hong Kong and we are on the eve of **Katina** becoming president of **ALA** so I decided to take this opportunity to say a few choice words.

I was trying to decide how to begin this column. Part of me suggested that I should begin with a little biblical verse:

"Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet." (Matthew 7:6)

Now while I, and everyone else who feels that there is no better professional meeting in the world than the **Charleston Conference**, agree that **Katina** is a pearl of inestimable value and a nearly holy (well, maybe only capable of raising holy hell), I decided to suggest that I and all other members of **ALA** were swine or dogs was not in good taste. (Lest you consult the most recent **ALA** directory, I think I am now a lapsed member)

Then I thought of beginning with a playful set of questions about an unnamed group: What organization

- Has 76 bureaucratic subunits?
- Has 57 department heads? (actually that this figure is smaller than the former gives me hope)
- A total of 270 employees?
- 4,000 committee members?
- Its members are organized into 11 divisions and innumerable subdivisions?
- Has at least 65 nominations committees?
- Awards/shares in awarding 92 prizes?
- Has 40 publications committees?
- Has 18 committees worrying about different kinds of standards?
- Has 26 committees focusing on management?

- Has 13 groups looking at continuing education?
- Spent 3.8 million dollars on a recent conference but took in 5 million?

The answer is of course the **American Library Association**.

But, the most important question that I should discuss is, is **ALA** a good place for a nice girl like **Katina**?

My complaints with **ALA** are actually few. Simply put, when I am at **ALA** national meetings with the smell of new carpet blocking my sinuses I question, is this a good idea gone awry?

ALA's motto and mission statements contain good ideas:

"The best reading, for the largest number, at the least cost."

(Adopted 1892; reinstated by **ALA** Council, 1988).

"The mission of the **American Library Association** is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all."

(Both quotes from *ALA Handbook of Organization*, p. 8)

Who can quarrel with

- Good reading material?
- Free access to reading material?
- Cost effective reading material?
- Development, promotion, and improvement of good service and the profession?
- Enhanced learning and access to information?

Well, of course, there are a few governments and individuals around the world who fear that some information is dangerous or bad – but most people, including me, feel that free access to reading material is a good idea.

The worry about **ALA** that I have is, given all the energy that the thousands of thousands of members spend on **ALA** activities – have we become so involved in the means that we lose track of these simple ends/goals? Has our passion become for committees, nominating people for committees, holding committee meetings. I was never a great **ALA'er** but I do remember many days of running from one committee to the next to make sure that the

oral report or proposal was made to the right group, so it could get on the agenda of the next right group, so I could run for the business bureau to cue up for a computer – remembering to bring my own diskette, to print out the report/form/request, and turn it into the right baskets, etc.

ALA isn't just guilty of playing the fiddle while Rome burns. As members, we are busy writing selection policy standards to be used by those who buy the sheet music which will be catalogued and bound and then checked out to the person playing the music while Rome burns. That is, if one of our committees didn't prevent the purchase of buying music for fear that a library would check it out to a commercial musician who would play the music and not follow the appropriate copyright rules.

So, should **Katina** run and when she wins should she take the job? The answer is of course a resounding YES!!!

Anyone who can organize a motorized tour of a swamp with only one flashlight per hay wagon during a hurricane after having burned their fingers shucking half cooked clams and make hundreds of Charleston attendees believe they had a good time has ability!

I can see it now. At an opening gala session with one or both of the Mrs. Bushes speaking ad naseum about the importance of reading books to children, **Katina** will come in with her handheld bell and jive things up a bit. She will question whether we really need to employ four or five thousand people to put on the annual meetings?

Katina will also do all the things mentioned in her Web page: empower users, preserve access, promote the profession, get people to work smarter, and above all listen to people (**Katina@Katina.info**) www.katina.info.

Now, of course, I realize that since she will probably be out gallivanting around instead of publishing this rag/wonderful publication and so you won't read this until the dust has settled and **Katina** is hailed queen of the library world. But you will know why she won and perhaps a few of the problems she has to solve in 365 days. 🐾